DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 257 128 CS 208 996

AUTHOR Shoemaker, Pamela J.
TITLE All the Deviance That's Fit to Print: Newsworthiness and Social Change.
PUB DATE Aug 85
NOTE 33p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (68th, Memphis, TN, August 3-6, 1985).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Journalism; *Mass Media; *News Media; *News Reporting; Newswriting; Norms; *Social Change; Social Values
IDENTIFIERS *Deviance

ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between deviance and newsworthiness. A general explanation of deviance and definitions for five types of deviance--statistical, pathological, normative, labeling, and self-conception--are provided in the first sections of this paper. Next, the relationship between deviance and communication is explored, as are four approaches to communication: (1) content as function of media routines, (2) content as influenced by journalists' socialization and attitudes, (3) content as resulting from social and institutional forces, and (4) content as a function of ideological position. Major indicators of newsworthiness--such as novelty, conflict, sensationalism, and prominence--are also discussed, as well as other criteria, including timeliness, proximity, importance, and interest. A theoretical explanation for the relationship between deviance and newsworthiness is then provided. The summary points out that half of what is newsworthy can be interpreted as being deviant and that to the extent that deviant people and events bring about the opportunity for change, publicizing deviance is a prerequisite for controlling the direction and extent of social change. (DF)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED257128

# ALL THE DEVIANCE THAT'S FIT TO PRINT:
# NEWSWORTHINESS AND SOCIAL CHANGE

August 1985

Pamela J. Shoemaker

Assistant Professor
The University of Texas at Austin
Department of Journalism
Austin TX 78712
512-471-7708

Paper presented to the Communication Theory and Methodology Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, annual conference, August 1985, Memphis, Tennessee.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Pamela J. Shoemaker

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS 208 996

Mass communication research has long been fascinated with news--both the effects of news on audience members and the ways in which newsworthiness is determined. Studies of news' effects on voting, socialization, learning, and individual's perceptions of the world have a long and vital tradition in the literature, almost to the exclusion at times of entertainment content.[1] Another large body of literature looks at the ways in which journalists decide what is newsworthy, including studies of journalists' characteristics and values (see, for example, Johnstone, Slawski, and Bowman, 1977; Drew, 1975), the process of newsgathering (Tuchman, 1977), and the effects of various societal and institutional variables on news content (such as Tankard and Peirce, 1982; Becker, 1977; Weaver and Mullins, 1975).

Yet in all of this research, there is no in-depth theoretical consideration of precisely what news is. What do we mean when we say an event or person is newsworthy? Definitions of newsworthiness have ranged from the pragmatic ("News is whatever the editor decides is news," Hulteng and Nelson, 1971) to the philosophical ("The newsworthy event is one that affects or changes social, economic, political, physical or other relationships" Harriss, et al., 1977). Most news writing textbooks offer a laundry list of news criteria. The following list is adapted from four texts: Timeliness; proximity; importance, impact, or consequence; interest; conflict or controversy; sensationalism; prominence; and novelty, oddity, or the unusual (Stephens, 1970; Izard et al., 1973; Harriss et al., 1977; Dennis and Inmach, 1981). Yet, while such lists provide indicators of newsworthiness, they do not address the theoretical issues of explaining what underlying construct ties the indicators together into a meaningful "newsworthiness" package or of explaining why such content

should be important to journalists and society.

The purpose of this paper is to show the theoretical relationship of the newsworthiness concept to the mass media's role in social change by examining its indicators in the light of various conceptualizations of the construct "deviance." In brief, I will argue that an assessment of deviance underlies many of the indicators of newsworthiness. Therefore, much mass media news content elaborates the extent and direction of deviance in society and has direct implications for the mass media's impact on social change. First, I will cover five conceptualizations of the deviance construct. Second, I will show the relationship between newsworthiness definitions and deviance definitions, and, finally, I will discuss the implications of the mass media's emphasis on deviance for social change.

## DEVIANCE

The earliest sociological interest in deviance focused on eliminating it as an undesirable social problem, but the emphasis shifted in the early twentieth century toward studying deviance as a sociological problem which had social and cultural sources (Bell, 1976). In his seminal work on deviance more than 20 years ago, Becker (1963) outlined three then-current definitions of deviance: (a) statistical, (b) pathological, and (c) rules. The statistical conception of deviance considered any wide variance from the mean occurrence as deviant, so that minorities would by definition be considered deviant, an idea that Moscovici echoed as late as 1980. The pathological definition used a medical analogy of disease to explain such "mental diseases" as homosexuality, divorce, crime, art, and undesired political leadership. The rules definition was normative; deviance was equated with rule-breaking.

Becker and those who came after him advocated an interactionist perspective of deviance which has been called labeling theory, and an even newer, cognitive definition of deviance is outlined by Wells (1978) in which deviance is a characteristic of an individual's self-conception.

### The Statistical Definition of Deviance

The simplest and perhaps most common definition of deviance is statistical. Anything which differs too much from the average is deviant (Becker, 1963). Statistical deviance is the basis for many psychological tests; if one scores too far from the mean, then he is considered deviant (Bell, 1976).

Gibbs (1981) says that statistics is one way to determine what a norm is; a norm

is equated with typical behavior, obviating the evaluative dimension that is generally assumed when discussing norms. A statistical definition of deviance does gave the advantage of ignoring the negative, subjective states of shame or guilt typically associated with normative deviance, but many people may be regarded as deviant simply because they possess a rare attribute, such as lefthandedness or red hair. Persons with specialized and highly desirable skills would be considered as deviant as those with undesirable attributes.

**The Pathological Definition of Deviance**

One of the oldest explanations for deviance has been that there is something wrong within the deviant individual (Bell, 1976). The pathological conceptualization of deviance uses a medical analogy to explain deviant behaviors: Deviance is viewed as something in which no normal, healthy person would take part, and so deviant individuals are by definition not healthy (Hills, 1980). In the early days, the deviant individual was thought to be possessed by evil spirits, but modern versions of the pathological model center on genetic or psychological defects (Bell, 1976). Deviance is seen as a "disease in the body of society" which must be eliminated or controlled (Hills, 1980).

Matza (1969) points out that the pathological definition of deviance grew as a natural result from the medical concern with health and illness in plants and animals: Disease threatens the survival of the organism and is therefore important for study. When the concept "pathology" was extended to refer to the social life, deviance was seen as a virus of sorts which threatens the life of society.

This emphasis on disease as a threat to society's well-being leads naturally into

functionalism, and the concept of "dysfunction" is seen as similar to "pathology." Many considered functionalism a "latter-day version of pathology" (Matza, 1969). Functionalism may well have provided a transition between the pathological and normative conceptualizations of deviance.

**The Normative Definition of Deviance**

A normative theoretical approach to deviance emphasizes behaviors that violate social norms. Behavior is de facto deviant when compared to some norm external to the individual. In fact, it is not even necessary that the individual knows he is considered deviant (Wells, 1978).

Gibbs (1981) says that almost all major sociological theories have had normative components, including Merton's theory of anomie and deviant behavior. Merton (1968) outlines four types of deviance, all of which are related to norm breaking: (a) Innovation, which refers to the rejection of institutional norms but the retention of cultural norms. Merton says that most of the deviance studied falls into this category, including such deviant acts as crime, but that innovation does not have to be dysfunctional. (b) Ritualism, where cultural norms are abandoned even while institutional norms are compulsively adhered to. (c) Retreatism, where both cultural and institutional norms are abandoned. (d) Rebellion, in which cultural and institutional norms are in conflict.

Birenbaum and Lesieur (1982) outline other types of norms in addition to Merton's general institutional and cultural norms: (a) Rules of identity, which specify the collective assessment of who has the right to be present in a given circumstance. (b) Polite interaction rules, our expectations about what face-to-face

interactions will be like. (c) Civil-legal rules, which are laws designed to regulate the relationships between people and collectives. (d) Constituent rules, the unconscious rules we all use in understanding, interpreting, and negotiating reality.

We could look at an infinite variety of specific norms whose breaking might be a signal of deviance, but the central issue in normative deviance is that deviance is a result of some act, the breaking of some norm. In addition, there is a negative connotation to normative deviance, an assumption that deviance is dysfunctional for both the individual and society (Rosenberg et al., 1982), although some (including Erikson, 1966; Scott, 1972; and Birenbaum and Lesieur, 1982) have suggested that deviance may in fact perform important functions for society. Some norm breaking may be purposive and designed to be functional for the individual or group doing the norm breaking, e.g., political activists (Walton, 1973).

## The Labeling Definition of Deviance

Early labeling theorists such as Becker (1963) and Erikson (1966) challenged the normative definition of deviance. Labeling advocates believe that an individual becomes deviant when and because someone else calls him deviant, not (in the extreme form) because of any inherent badness.

Becker (1963) presented the basic ideas in labeling theory as a result of observing situations in which norms were broken but the norm breaker was not labeled as deviant--when people may gossip, but look the other way. "Whether a given act is deviant or not depends in part on the nature of the act (that is, whether or not it violates some rule) and in part on what other people do about it."

Deviance, Erikson (1966:26) says, is a quality conferred upon behavior by

observers and not a quality inherent in that behavior. The amount of deviance in a community at any one time will be roughly equivalent to the available space in its control mechanism. "At any given time, then, the 'worst' people in the community are considered its criminals, the 'sickest' its patients, no matter how serious these conditions may appear according to some universal standard."

Becker (1963) says that the assignment of the label "deviance" is an "interaction between the person who commits an act and those who respond to it." Becker and Erikson view the deviance situation from the standpoint of the deviant person, whereas normative sociologists view the situation from the standpoint of the deviant act's consequences (Gouldner, 1968).

Several scholars have pointed out the symbolic interactionist roots of labeling theory (such as Schur, 1980; Glassner, 1982; and Rosenberg, et al., 1982). Glassner goes so far to say that labeling theory is not an independent theory at all, but a special application of symbolic interactionism. Based on the work of George Herbert Mead, symbolic interactionism explains phenomena as being produced and maintained by the participants themselves through their social interactions. All social phenomena, including deviance, are situationally defined.

This interactionist perspective is clearly important to Becker's view of deviance. We cannot look at deviance as an objective and immutable phenomenon to which people may react, but rather as the result of social interaction (Schur, 1980). In other words, "persons are creating deviants through interactional processes" (Glassner, 1982).

**The Self-Conception Definition of Deviance**

The last definition of deviance is a newer, cognitive one which depends on the subjective meaning of behavior for its enactors. Behavior is consciously deviant to the extent that a person or group is aware that what he is doing is in some sense wrong or disapproved. The power to categorize a person as deviant lies entirely within that person or group (Wells, 1978).

Several aspects of self-conception are presumed to have motivational implications--the level of self-regard or self-esteem, the internal structure of the overall self-concept, and the concept of self-identity. The "self-esteem hypothesis" holds that people will do things to keep their self-esteem high. "The structure of self-conception" includes self-images and self-ideals, as well as an evaluation of how internally consistent these structures are. The "identity content" of self-conception motivates people to act in accord with their self-perceptions, which in turn reinforces their self-perceptions (Wells, 1978).

Mead argued that a person's self-image is a societal creation, developing through his experiences with others (Coser, 1982). Coser points out that the idea of internalization of society's demands acting as a control mechanism is not new, having been suggested by Durkheim (1933), Freud (Gerth and Mills, 1953), Piaget (1948), and Parsons (1964).

Yet this conceptualization of deviance introduces a cognitive element to a concept which has been defined in primarily sociological terms. The individual's self-conception is not merely a function of society, as Mead would suggest, but is also affected by a series of psychological variables.

**Deviance and Communication**

Communication is clearly important to deviance, and an element of communication is included in most discussions of deviance and social control (see, for example, Becker, 1963; Bell, 1976; Schur, 1980; Gibbs, 1981; Birenbaum and Lesieur, 1982). No matter which view of deviance one takes, communication plays an essential role. If a deviant act is not communicated to the community, then there is no opportunity to judge that a norm has been broken. What people do not know about, they cannot label as deviant. If an individual has no knowledge of his community's standards or opinion, then he has limited basis for developing a deviant self-concept.

Yet, while many deviance theorists cite the importance of communication and specifically of the mass media, they often treat the mass media as mere channels through which information passes about norm breaking or about labels that others have assigned. The type of information, even the amount of information (Bell, 1976), is seen critical to deviance and social control, but there is little recognition that the mass media may themselves transform information and affect the deviance of people and groups. When a communication theory is cited by deviance theorists, it is usually Lazarsfeld's limited effects model and the two-step flow. Although Schur (1980) also suggests that the media selectivity and word usage may be important in the definition of deviance, he does not suggest a theoretical basis.

Although no integrated content theory exists which can adequately explain all influences on mass media content, deviance theorists may benefit from looking at several theoretical approaches discussed by communication scholars such as Gans (1979), Gitlin (1980), Cohen and Young (1981), and Altschull (1984). These approaches look at media content as a dependent variable, with content sometimes not mirroring

reality. The approaches can be grouped into four general categories:

1. Content as a function of media routines. Several researchers (such as Gitlin, 1980; Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1973; and Goldenberg, 1975) have studied the influences of newsgathering habits on mass media content. These studies locate the explanations for differences in media presentation and for content distortions in how news organizations gather, process, and transmit content. Media routines such as deadlines, use of sources, event-orientation of most stories, styles of writing, reliance on wire services, and gatekeeping have been shown to affect the kinds of stories that are written and published or broadcast.

2. Content as influenced by journalists' socialization and attitudes. Researchers such as Breed (1955) and Johnstone, Slawski, and Bowman (1972) have investigated ways in which journalists' professional socialization and personal attitudes affect the kinds of stories they write. Young (1981) describes how journalists' professional standards may result in their having a centrist view of the world which results in their framing reality as divided between a consensual majority and a deviant minority. Another approach has journalists viewing their professional roles as public educators, giving the public what it needs (Cohen and Young, 1981).

3. Content as resulting from social and institutional forces. As Gans (1979) outlines it, to understand the production of the news, one must first understand the power relationships involved between various institutions or social forces outside of the news organizations. The news is shaped by technological, economic, and cultural forces, as well as by the audience, advertisers, and news sources.

4. Content as a function of ideological positions. In a hegemonic approach (Gramsci, 1971), the mass media are viewed as having a vested interest in the status

quo, with content reflecting this interest. While the media will criticize the status quo enough to establish their legitimacy as news organizations, the media will never seriously threaten the status quo (Gitlin, 1980). Altschull (1984) has suggested another ideological approach, where media content reflects the ideology of those who finance the mass media.

These theoretical approaches will be useful in looking at the ways in which the mass media may contribute to what Schur (1980) calls the "deviantizing" of people and groups. There is little doubt that journalistic practices such as applying summary labels to individuals like "ex-mental patient" have an impact in reinforcing deviance stereotypes (Schur, 1980). In addition, if we accept an interactionist perspective of deviance, then an important partner in most public interactions is certainly the mass media. The mass media create deviance by labeling and they reflect normative deviance by transmitting information about norms and norm breakers.

Yet, although what most people know about the world comes from the mass media, there are instances in which media content presents a distorted picture of reality. It is essential that we consider ways in which the mass media may interact in the deviantizing process, such as through the determination of what is newsworthy and therefore worthy of mass media coverage.

## NEWSWORTHINESS

One of the mechanisms through which the mass media exert their influence on social change is in assessing the newsworthiness of people and events. Not only are deviant people and events often considered newsworthy, but deviance is itself an integral part of the newsworthiness definition.

Newsworthiness is an important criterion for publication; journalists continually emphasize discovering the new and transmitting that information to their audience members. Alexander (1981) says that the news media fulfill a normative function in society by providing ways for the society to organize and understand what happens through formulating normative explanations for what happens. Discovering instances where norms have been broken (news) is the only way that the news media can fulfill that normative function.

Of the usual indicators of newsworthiness (timeliness; proximity; importance, impact or consequence; interest; conflict or controversy; sensationalism; prominence; and novelty, oddity, or the unusual), the last four seem the most likely to be related to deviance: conflict/controversy, sensationalism, prominence, and novelty/oddity/unusual.

### Novelty

This is the most obvious, of course, since odd people or events are likely to be deviant. But this category also includes rare events and the unexpected, such as airplane crashes. An airplane crash is a deviant event, since most planes do not crash. The norm for airplane flights is a safe landing. Heart transplants were once rare events, each one earning national news coverage. Today, however, many transplant

operations occur every year and so each operation is less newsworthy, less deviant in comparison to other modes of heart treatment. Today's definition of a newsworthy heart operation event is reserved for mechanical or cross-species heart transplantations. Soon even those may become commonplace and no longer deviant or newsworthy.

This conception of deviance is primarily statistical. The frequency with which an event occurs determines whether it is deviant and newsworthy or commonplace. The more frequently an event occurs, the less deviant and the less newsworthy it is. Thus, even if norms are broken, the novelty eventually disappears, with the ultimate result of changing the norm.

**Conflict**

Conflict and controversy are newsworthy because they involve changes in customs and values, social unrest, and changes in the status quo (Izard et al., 1973; Dennis and Inmach, 1981).

Conflict stories include all disagreement or competition between groups, and deviance is possible whenever someone challenges a norm. Examples of conflict include the actions of most political groups--particularly those special interest groups which advocate social change. Civil rights groups advocated and achieved major social change. Anti-abortion and pro-choice groups are in constant conflict about the rights of fetuses and women. Gay rights groups challenge laws and norms concerning homosexuals. Radical environmental groups take physical action to protect baby seals against their human enemies. All of these are examples of people outside the established order advocating a change of laws or norms--changes which must be considered deviant when compared to the established order.

Although much conflict represents deviant acts or ideological positions, nondeviant (or at least low-level deviant) conflict also exists. Where conflict is institutionalized, then the norm becomes conflict and deviance is not necessarily present. An obvious example is the U.S. electoral system, whereby two or more opponents regularly challenge each other. The fact of the U.S. two-party political system is that the two candidates are generally more alike than different from each other. Although there are generally some ideological differences between the two parties' candidates, these differences are usually slight. It is the rare election that sees a candidate advocate any political position that could ever be called deviant or a serious challenge to the political status quo.

Thus, while conflict is almost always newsworthy, it is deviant only when the conflict is not institutionalized. When the source of conflict comes from outside the established order, then newsworthy conflict communicates deviance.

**Sensationalism**

Izard et al. (1973) say that sensationalism is very similar to conflict, but centers on violence and crime. It is a "flaunting of basic ideas about what's important and right or wrong." Violence and crime are types of deviance--they break existing norms of behavior. Criminals break institutional norms--laws--and so come to the attention of various agents of social control, especially law enforcement officials and journalists. Sometimes the police discover a crime and report it to journalists; sometimes the reverse process occurs. Police and journalists work together--intentionally or not--to control the amount of criminal deviance in society. One punishes the deviant act through legal statutes; the other punishes the act through publicity and loss of reputation.

People and groups who challenge the status quo often must resort to conflict or sensationalism in order to get the attention of the mass media (Cobb and Elder, 1972). Because media coverage is often essential to the ability of the group to mobilize resources (Lauderdale and Estep, 1980), some groups are willing to resort to violence or crime in order to achieve their goals. Others rely on conflict to get media coverage; they often create conflict situations--media events--in order to get the media's attention.

In these instances, the people and groups purposively engage in deviant behavior not so much because they are deviants, but rather because they want media coverage. It is the "P.T. Barnum" approach again--that being labeled deviant is a small penalty to pay for getting the media coverage so essential to success. "Hard news is dramatic, conflict-filled, and violent," says Jamieson and Campbell (1983). "The news media are more likely to cover a spokesman who is flamboyant." Thus, although sensational activities are by definition newsworthy and deviant, they are sometimes a reflection of deviant attitudes and behaviors, and other times a strategy for getting news coverage which may be more deviant than the group's usual activities.

**Prominence**

Newsworthiness also encompasses people who are celebrities or notorious for some reason. This can extend to the ludicrous--when the U.S. President gets a common cold, journalists interview his physician. When a successful actor marries or divorces, the event is publicized world wide. Such events are newsworthy not because of their inherent significance, but rather because of the nature of the people involved. Movie stars and politicians are prominent because they are somehow different from the rest of us. They are deviant when compared to norms of daily activities, employment, money

earned or inherited, and so on. It is this differentness or deviance than makes their lives interesting reading for others. If they were no different from the rest of us, then their activities would not be newsworthy.

**Other Newsworthiness Criteria**

Hall et al. (1981) say that the most basic news value "involves an orientation to items which are 'out of the ordinary.'" Yet news organizations regularly transmit information that does not involve conflict, sensationalism, prominence, or anything unusual. The remaining four newsworthiness criteria--timeliness, proximity, importance, and interest--also influence the definition of news, and they relate to deviance in different ways.

Importance (including impact and consequence) and interest are often positively related to the four deviance criteria in that novel, conflict, sensational, and prominent situations are often inherently interesting or important. While mechanical hearts are a novelty, they are also an important medical advance of interest to millions of people. The conflict generated by special interest groups who advocate social change is both important and interesting, because of its possible consequence to society. Violent, sensational events often have important consequence for society and individuals. Prominent individuals seem always to be interesting and are sometimes important due to their social or political roles, such as being head of state.

There are also important or interesting events which do not involve much deviance, such as city council meetings. Meetings of public groups are often covered by the mass media as part of the media's social obligation to their communities. Some

newspapers pride themselves on being "newspapers of record" which document the actions of elected and appointed officials to ensure an informed citizenry. Yet being a newspaper of record may mean that accounts of such meetings are publicized regardless of whether the meetings results in anything important or interesting. The information is transmitted because of the long-term needs of society to have such information recorded, perhaps a form of long-term social consequence.

Such an obligatory recording of the actions of administrative boards and city councils is likely to result in minimal, less prominent coverage, however, unless something deviant occurred in the meeting. Conflict, sensationalism, prominence, or novelty in city council meetings will result in coverage with more space or time allocated and more prominence given to the story. So, while some socially significant events get media coverage no matter how ordinary or routine they are, the deviance of the event will affect the extent of the event's newsworthiness and the amount of space or time and prominence allocated. Deviance in the form of conflict, prominent speakers, sensational behaviors, or novel activities will increase the newsworthiness of what are otherwise ordinary and minimally newsworthy events.

Timeliness and proximity are key criteria only for judging the newsworthiness of marginally important or interesting events. A boring city council meeting will receive some perfunctory coverage by local media immediately after the meeting, while being ignored by media elsewhere. Deviant people and events--those involving conflict, sensationalism, prominence, or novelty--are often newsworthy regardless of the timeliness or proximity involved. Interest in deviant people and events is almost always high, and deviance is often important regardless of when or where it is discovered.

**Theoretical Explanation**

The relationship between deviance and newsworthiness relates directly to the theoretical approaches to the study of mass media content discussed earlier--routines of newsgathering, journalists' socialization and attitudes, social and institutional factors, and ideological influences. Judgments about an event's newsworthiness are made by individual journalists, making the journalist-centered approach applicable. Yet frequently it is the executives of the news organizations who establish the organizations' definition of news, and not the reporters or low-level editors (Epstein, 1981).

News executives allocate time and resources for newsgathering according to pressures from economics, advertising, sources, special interest groups, the audience, and other social or institutional forces. This indicates that the social influence theory is probably also applicable, but the hierarchical nature of the approaches should be considered. If societal factors affect what is newsworthy, one explanation for such influence would be hegemonic. As businessmen with a vested interest in the status quo, media owners find it functional to expose deviance. This has the simultaneous effect of giving the audience the conflict, sensationalism, prominence, and novelty it desires and of setting the boundaries of what is proper and acceptable behavior in society. Several theorists (including Erikson, 1966; Scott, 1972; Birenbaum and Lesieur, 1982) have suggested that deviance is functional for society. Deviance creates a common focus for group emotion against threats to the status quo, it clarifies the rules for everyone else without their actually testing the rules themselves; it serves as a warning of weaknesses in the system. The process of noticing and punishing or controlling deviance allows the

controlling mechanisms to exhibit their power.

News is a commodity with monetary value, and the success of news organizations often rides on their ability to define what news is. Although individuals make news decisions, there is also often written or unwritten policy in the newsroom about what constitutes news to that organization. Deviance is news, and deviant events make up much of the news content for any given day. In addition, the more deviant a person or event is, the more prominently he/it will be covered and the more space (or time) will be allocated.

Much of the way in which newsworthiness is defined relates to deviance, and most of those deviance-newsworthiness criteria are normative. Conflict, sensationalism, and prominence are all related to departures from the usual, from societal norms, although the pathological perspective sometimes crops up too, particularly in crime news, where the criminal may be found not guilty "by reason of insanity," or an increase in the number of transients is explained as caused by an increase in the number of mental patients released. Novelty is more a statistical conceptualization of deviance, depending on the rare or unusual event for definition.

Yet, while news organizations may use the normative, statistical, or even pathological definitions of deviance in determining what is newsworthy, we must not ignore the effects of such usage on labeling. Journalists have the power to label people as deviant through their news stories, and, when labeling occurs, it is as a result of the journalists' having used their own normative, statistical, or pathological conceptualizations of what is deviant. Labeling is, therefore, the logical result of decisions made with statistical, normative, or pathological comparisons.

## SOCIAL CHANGE

Although studies of the role of the mass media in social control have been numerous (Comstock, 1982), few have discussed how the deviance of people and groups may affect whether the media act as controlling agents. Studies of newsworthiness are numerous, yet the relationship between deviance and the indicators of newsworthiness has gone mostly unnoticed.

By their very existence, deviant people and groups bring the opportunity for change. If that change seems threatening to the status quo, then its agents will act to control the direction and extent of the change. Since what is unknown cannot be controlled, the emphasis on deviance within indicators of newsworthiness is functional for the status quo. Mass media publicity of deviance is a necessary first step in controlling the threatened change; journalists act as controlling agents.

Critics of the U.S. mass media (such as Miliband, 1969; Gans, 1979; Gitlin, 1980; Lauderdale and Estep, 1980; Paletz and Entman, 1981) have suggested that the media act as agents of social control, not by preventing the publication of new and different ideas, but rather by varying their coverage of political groups according to how different the groups are from the status quo. Miliband (1969:238) says that views which do not somehow support the political consensus are brought into ideological line by ridiculing them as "irrelevant eccentricities which serious and reasonable people may dismiss as of no consequence."

Implicit in these scholars' work is the idea that deviant people and groups will be identified as such by the mass media and that stories about deviant people and groups will be qualitatively different from stories about nondeviant people and groups.

Of course, the relationship of the mass media to deviant people and groups is different than the relationship of other societal agents of social control, such as law enforcement officials. The law is designed to punish one form of deviance, crime, when that crime comes to its attention. When deviance is noticed by law enforcement agencies, it is generally punished.

When deviance is noticed by the mass media, however, deviance is sometimes rewarded and sometimes punished--and occasionally rewarded and punished simultaneously. Legend has it that P.T. Barnum, the circus promoter, said that he didn't care what the media said about him as long as they got his name right; he saw publicity as essential for his promotion activities. And special interest groups often also see that the mass media are an essential ingredient in their achieving their goals (Goldenberg, 1975). Thus, deviant people and groups sometimes need the mass media in order to achieve their goals. The mass media, of course, have an equal amount invested in the publication of deviant acts, since much of what we call newsworthy is actually deviant. News (particularly information about deviance) has economic value and is essential to media success.

The relationship between the deviant person or group and the mass media is often symbiotic, and such would the relationship remain if the mass media were mere channels for the transmission of information about people and groups. In reality, however, simultaneous with their providing the publicity that deviant individuals and groups require, the mass media also manipulate that information in such a way as to render the groups impotent in achieving their goals (Shoemaker, 1984). The mass media treat deviant people and groups in such a way as to make them seem to have ridiculous goals which no reasonable person would take seriously (Miliband, 1969).

If the mass media are not mere channels for the transmission of deviance information, then we must consider theoretical explanations for the influence that the media have on content. Of the four theoretical approaches previously mentioned--routines of newsgathering, journalists' socialization and attitudes, social and institutional factors, and ideological influences--the journalist-centered approach obviously addresses the relationship between journalists' attitudes and media content. Yet these four general approaches appear to be hierarchically arrayed in terms of the social significance, level of analysis, and the ability to explain each other's effects on content. Routines of newsgathering exist because individual journalists create them. Journalists influence the news because of pressures from economic and cultural forces. Such economic and cultural forces typically work to maintain the status quo, a hallmark of hegemony. So, journalists' attitudes about deviance may be a lower-level indicator of a broader, possibly hegemonic, process at work.

Such an idea is supported by scholars who point out the close relationship of deviance, social control, and power (such as Liazos, 1972; Schur, 1980; Birenbaum and Lesieur, 1982). The power to label someone "deviant" is crucial in the ultimate control of deviance by various societal mechanisms. Schur (1980), however, cautions against a purely hegemonic explanation for social control by deviance, saying that it is too simple in that it ignores diversity in deviance-defining; "the multiplicity of group interests and social forces that may come into play; the mixed or ambiguous interests that some groups may have; the inevitable limitations on absolute control that confront the state apparatus or ruling elite even in situations when they might seek to exert it." There are many control mechanisms in society in addition to law enforcement, the official arm of the state (Coser, 1982).

A hegemonic explanation does not, however, require that the process of social control be administered consistently or evenly, contrary to what Schur writes. Ideological control is not actually administered by that abstraction known as the state, but rather by its representatives, such as journalists, businessmen, and others who have a vested interest in seeing the status quo continue with minimal changes. Because these administrators have varied individual interests in addition to their common interest in seeing the societal status quo continue, their decisions and actions will not be uniform, an idea similar to Altschull's (1984) theory of media content reflecting the ideology of those who finance the media.

The presence of ideological controls--whether hegemonic or financer-specific--does not mean that certain groups such as mass media owners will not criticize the status quo or never recommend minor changes. Gitlin (1980) points out that the mass media must criticize the status quo enough to legitimize their role as news organizations. But the mass media will never advocate so much change as to risk the overall stability of the government. The Watergate scandal is a good example of this: The mass media discovered and publicized a story very critical of the President of the United States which ultimately led to his resignation. The media stories did not, however, criticize the U.S. system of government, and, in fact, the whole affair was ultimately taken as evidence that the system was viable--the system survived the crimes of its caretakers. The U.S. mass media were able to simultaneously legitimize their role as news organizations and affirm the viability of the U.S. form of government.

We also need to consider whether publicizing all types of deviance sends similar messages to the status quo, that is, whether all forms of deviance threaten change. For

example, statistical deviance is probably not much of a threat to the status quo by the simple virtue of its minority status. The conceptualization of statistical deviance is not ideological; it excludes any assumption of threats to change norms. Therefore it does not require much attention from controllers.

Pathological and normative deviance are more troublesome to the status quo, since they present clear challenges, the former through a kind of breakdown of normal operations, and the latter through direct ideological alternatives. Labeling deviance could also be included in this category, even though its advocates state its freedom from the judgmental negativeness so typical of normative deviance. The deviance label is nothing more than one individual's comparison of an individual or group to existing norms. One person's opinion may not be very important when compared to a society-wide normative assessment, but that person's opinion can be influential when he has the ability to transmit it to a larger audience, as journalists do. Thus, mass media labeling is nothing more than journalists' normative judgments, and these judgments will draw and define the attention of those who control social change. The journalist acts as a surrogate judge of deviance for his audience members.

By itself, the self-conception of deviance will be not be of concern to agents of social control. When an individual's self-conception as deviant remains private, it will do little to draw the attention of controlling agents since there is no opportunity for pathological, normative, or labeling deviance assessments to be made. If self-conceptions become public matters, such as when homosexuals announce their status to heterosexual society, then attempts at control may be made.

## SUMMARY

Although the mass communication research literature includes many studies in which news content is either the independent or dependent variable, there has been little theoretical analysis of the concept newsworthiness. This paper suggests that indicators of newsworthiness are primarily related to the construct deviance, in that much of what is newsworthy can be interpreted as being deviant under one of five deviance definitions: statistical, pathological, normative, labeling, or self-conception.

Much of what journalists publicize as news is information about the deviance of people and events. To the extent that deviant people and events bring about the opportunity for change, publicizing deviance is a prerequisite for controlling the direction and extent of social change. Defining newsworthiness as deviance is therefore functional for the status quo.

## NOTES

[1] The author's review of research articles published between 1974 and 19 Journalism Quarterly under the subject heading "content" reveals that approximately 75 percent of the content research during those 10 years dealt with news content.

## REFERENCES

Alexander, J.C. (1981). "The Mass News Media in Systemic, Historical, and Comparative Perspective." In E. Katz and T. Szecsko (Eds.), Mass Media and Social Change, pp. 17-49. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Altschull, J.H. (1984). Agent of Power. New York: Longman.

Becker, H.S. (1963). Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance. New York, NY: Free Press of Glencoe

Becker, L.B. (1977) "Foreign Policy and Press Performance." Journalism Quarterly, 54, 364-368.

Bell, R.R. (1976). Social Deviance. Homewood, IL: Dorsey Press.

Birenbaum, A., and Lesieur, H. (1982). "Social Values and Expectations." In M.M. Rosenberg, R.A. Stebbins, and A. Turowetz (Eds.), The Sociology of Deviance, pp. 97-122. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.

Cobb, R.W., and Elder, C.D. (1972). Participation in American Politics: The Dynamics of Agenda-Building. Boston, MA: Allyn and Beacon.

Cohen, S., and Young, J. (1981). "Introduction." In S. Cohen and J. Young (Eds.). The Manufacture of News: Deviance, Social Problems and the Mass Media, pp. 17-33. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Comstock, G.A. (1982). "Information Management and Mass Media: Menace or Myth?" In J.P. Gibbs (Ed.), Social Control, pp. 205-227. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Coser, L.A. (1982). "The Notion of Control in Sociological Theory." In J.P. Gibbs (Ed.), Social Control, pp 13-22. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Dennis, E.E., and Ismach, A.H. (1981). Reporting Processes and Practices. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Drew, D.G. (1975) "Reporters' Attitudes, Expected Meetings with Source and Journalistic Objectivity." Journalism Quarterly, 52, 219-224, 271.

Durkheim, E. (1953). The Division of Labor in Society. New York, NY: Macmillan.

Epstein, E.J. (1981). "The Selection of Reality." In E. Abel (Ed.), What's News, pp. 119-132. San Francisco, CA: Institute for Contemporary Studies.

Erikson, K.T. (1966). Wayward Puritans: A Study in the Sociology of Deviance. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons.

Gans, H.J. (1979). Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.

Gerth, H., and Mills, C.W. (1953) Character and Social Structure. New York, NY: Harcourt Brace.

Gibbs, J.P. (1981). Norms, Deviance, and Social Control. New York, NY: Elsevier.

Gitlin, T. (1980). The Whole World Is Watching. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Glassner, B. (1982). "Labeling Theory." In M. Michael Rosenberg, R.A. Stebbins, and A. Turowetz (Eds.), The Sociology of Deviance, pp. 71-89. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.

Goldenberg, E.N. (1975). Making the Papers: The Access of Resource-Poor Groups to the Metropolitan Press. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.

Gouldner, A.W. (1968). "The Sociologist as Partisan: Sociology and the Welfare State." American Sociologist 3, 103-116.

Gramsci, A. (1971). Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci. Q. Hoare and G.N. Smith (Eds. and Trans.). New York: International Publishers.

Hall, S., Chritcher, C., Jefferson, T., Clarke, J., and Roberts, B. (1981). "The Social Production of News: Mugging in the Media." In S. Cohen and J. Young (Eds.), The Manufacture of News, pp. 335-367. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Harriss, J., Leiter, K., and Johnson, S. (1977). The Complete Reporter. New York, NY: Macmillan.

Hills, S.L. (1980). Demystifying Social Deviance. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Hulteng, J.L., and Nelson, R.P. (1971). The Fourth Estate. New York, NY: Harper & Row.

Izard, R.S., Culbertson, H.M., and Lambert, D.A. (1973). Fundamentals of News Reporting. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.

Jamieson, K.H., and Campbell, K.K. (1983). The Interplay of Influence. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Johnstone, J.W.C.; Slawski, E.J.; and Bowman, W.W. (1972) "The Professional Values of American Newsmen." Public Opinion Quarterly, 36, 522-540.

Lauderdale, P., and Estep, R.E. (1980). "The Bicentennial Protest: An Examination of Hegemony in the Definition of Deviant Political Activity." In P. Lauderdale (Ed.), A Political Analysis of Deviance, pp. 72-91. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Liazos, A. (1972). "The Poverty of the Sociology of Deviance: Nuts, Sluts, and Perverts." Social Problems 20, 103-120.

Matza, D. (1969). Becoming Deviant. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Merton, R.K. (1965) Social Theory and Social Structure. New York, NY: Press Press.

Miliband, R. (1969). "The Process of Legitimation." In R. Miliband, , The State in Capitalist Society, pp. 179-264. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

Moscovici, S. (1980). "Toward a Theory of Conversion Behavior." In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), Advances in Experimental Social Psychology 13, pp. 209-237. New York, NY: Academic Press.

Paletz, D.L., and Entman, R.M. (1981). Media. Power. Politics. New York, NY: Free Press.

Parsons, T. (1964). Social Structure and Personality. New York, NY: Free Press.

Piaget, J. (1948). The Moral Judgment of the Child. New York: Free Press.

Rosenberg, M.M., Stebbins, R.A., and Turowetz, A. (Eds.) (1982). The Sociology of Deviance. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.

Schur, E.M. (1980). The Politics of Deviance: Stigma Contests and the Uses of Power. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Scott, R.A. (1972). "A Proposed Framework for Analyzing Deviance as a Property of Social Order." In R.A. Scott and J.D. Douglas (Eds.), Theoretical Perspectives on Deviance, pp. 9-35. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Shoemaker, P.J. (1984). "Media Treatment of Deviant Political Groups." Journalism Quarterly 61, 66-75, 82.

Stephens, M. (1980). Broadcast News. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Tankard, J. and Peirce, K. (1982) "Alcohol Advertising and Magazine Editorial Content." Journalism Quarterly, 59, 302-305.

Tuchman, G. (1973). "Making News by Doing Work: Routinizing the Unexpected," American Journal of Sociology, 79, 110-131.

Tuchman, G. (1977) "Objectivity as Strategic Ritual: An Examination of Newsmen's Notions of Objectivity." American Journal of Sociology, 77, 660-679.

Walton, P. (1973). "The Case of the Weathermen: Social Reaction and Radical Commitment." In I. Taylor and L. Taylor (Eds.), Politics and Deviance, pp. 157-181. Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books.

Weaver, D. H., and Mullins, L.E. (1975) "Content and Format Charactristics of Competing Daily Newspapers." Journalism Quarterly, 52, 257-264.

Wells, L.E. (1978). "Theories of Deviance and the Self-Concept." Social Psychology 41, 189-204.

Young, J. (1981). "Beyond the Consensual Paradigm: A Critique of Left Functionalism in Media Theory." In S. Cohen and J. Young (Eds.), The Manufacture of News, pp 393-421. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.